



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# VIKING RAIDS

FOR SLAVES & BOOTY

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# Viking raids for slaves and booty

## Introduction

The words of of wisdom below are attributed to Odin (havi -the advice of the high one) and are from a collection of old Norse poems contained within the Codex Regius.

Havamal, verse 58.

*Up at dawn and out must he who rob life and wealth.  
A sleeping wolf seldom gets a thigh or a sleeping man, victory.*

The advice obviously pertains to going raiding and is similar to today's saying that the early bird catches the worm.

## Modern Cinematic Vikings

The modern cinematic and TV shows showing Viking raiders arriving on the shores of some unfortunate country with hundreds of ships and thousands of men was not a reality. When the above scenario did occur, it was an invasion and an attempt to seize land, but the initial Viking incursions were all about obtaining booty and slaves and increasing the raider's own personal wealth and status.

## Anglo Saxon chronicle

The Anglo Saxon chronicle stated that a unit of 36 men or more was a 'Here' (army) which to modern people, is an insignificant number, but in the early medieval period, when people lived in isolated and tiny villages or hamlets, the arrival of even a dozen or so warriors, equipped for battle, would have been a terrifying experience for a small population of a couple of hundred individuals, of whom very few would have either fighting experience or weapons.

They would be easily overwhelmed by a small raiding party and forced to submit  
The Viking reputation for violence and creating terror is well founded but it also had a purpose which worked to the raiders advantage.

A show of force and the brutal slaughtering of any individual or individuals who resisted would have the desired effect of quickly subduing the rest of the population and would have forced them to hand over their valuables. The raiding party would then often seize able bodied men and women for slaves and influential and important people, such as priests, for ransoming.

The Vikings would then usually burn the buildings they looted as they believed that any spirits who resided in the premises could not follow and haunt them.

Whilst atrocities did sometimes occur, like they do in all wars or violent actions, more often than not, the raiders would withdraw with their booty and captives, leaving the survivors unmolested. Often this was because the Vikings believed in not 'slaying the goose that laid the golden egg' and would raid the village, monastery or farm again in the future, once recovery had been made and enough wealth had been accumulated to make such a raid worthwhile.

The taking of slaves was a profitable enterprise, so slaughtering whole populations would have been akin to committing self-inflicted economic damage.

Viking Dublin would become one of the major Viking slave markets and this demanded huge numbers of human captives in order that personal wealth and the local economy increased and thrived accordingly. Genocide was not profitable!

### **Viking longships**

Most Viking longships were capable of carrying crews of between 30 and 40 men, so it is likely that a raiding party would only consist of a single ship or possibly two or three more. Most of the raiders were very young men, desperate for adventure, wealth and to increase their reputations and standing. Small parties had the advantage of being able to move quickly and to avoid detection.

Viking ships would loiter off the targeted coastline beyond the vision of anyone who could have spotted them, then at dawn they would have lowered the mast and rowed to the shoreline or entered a river, moving towards their intended target. If they were spotted, it was likely too late for the intended victims to raise the alarm, as to get help from other villages or to raise the local militia, would take considerable time, and the raiders would have completed their business and have effected their escape.

The raiders would also have previously gathered intelligence on their target, information obtained from people such as traders and prisoners.

Records of raids on holy places seem to indicate that different groups of Vikings raided the same churches and monasteries regularly, which suggests that different raiding parties did not know about each other's intentions or that they were even rivals. The fact that these targets were still operating after recent raids, also gives credence that wholesale slaughter was not usually practised but that places were given an opportunity to recover from previous raids and to accumulate enough wealth to make the risk of raiding worthwhile.

### **Viking rape and pillage**

Another popular misconception about the Vikings is that they were also serial rapists and that this was the guaranteed fate of any woman who was captured, yet whilst the records within the Christian countries report murder, enslavement, extortion and robbery, no mention of rape is made.

There is a record written by one Adam of Bremen in the 11th century which declares that in Scandinavia, during the Viking period, that the rape or sexual abuse of a virgin was a capital offence and that it was a heinous crime against a Norse warrior's code of honour.

Another record pertaining to Viking raids in France, both in 830 and 831, records two incidents of reported large scale raping, both committed by Christians. In one case, this was a mass rape of nuns.

It may be argued that for all their love of violence, that the Vikings considered rape taboo. My personal opinion was that it would have happened as it does in every war, especially because many of the Vikings were young, often drunk and that nobody really cared about the victims, but there again, the warriors of the Christian armies raped women through history as did Roman and other ancient armies. They were all as likely bad as each other.

Another known feature of Viking raids is that on the few recorded occasions when they were intercepted by the local militia (Fyrd), they fled and did not give battle. This demonstrates that raiding was an economic enterprise and that the raiding parties were not prepared to sacrifice their lives in a fight. Why would they? They were not seeking to conquer or occupy any place. They wanted monetary gain. Easier to run away and go and raid some other place.

The Vikings were violent in battle and they certainly used it as a tool to create terror but usually it was a means to an end, utilised to extract booty and take slaves, but the Anglo Saxons had a reputation for

extreme violence too as did the Franks. It was just the way it was and we should not make judgement on people who lived at a time and within cultures where this behaviour was accepted and viewed as the norm.

### **Havamal, verse 76.**

*Cattle die, kindred die, we ourselves die just the same.  
But the good repute never dies, of one who has earned it.*

Honour and reputation mattered.